

# Life in the graduate graveyards: Making sense of underemployment in graduate careers

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## Introduction

For over eighty years the interaction of waves of university expansion and the economic cycle has ensured concern about the ability of the UK economy to absorb increased numbers of graduates, and the calibre of jobs they obtain has been a perennial debate (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Wolf, 2004). As early as 1937 the National Union of Students (NUS) observed that university graduates could 'look forward only with uncertainty to employment of a kind appropriate to their academic achievements' with many in the end having to content themselves with work 'in which their capacities were not fully used' (NUS, 1937: 8). Recent analysis suggests that between 2001 and 2012 the UK economy managed to absorb the increased supply of graduates from Higher Education, through the upskilling of existing occupations and creation of new ones, but a significant proportion found employment in non-graduate occupations (Green and Henseke, 2016). There remains a dearth of research which examines the experience of underemployed graduates, and how they make sense of the experience in career terms. In this chapter we report on an in-depth, qualitative study of underemployed graduates to explore how they made sense of and responded to their underemployment.

## Graduate underemployment

The most recent figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) indicate 46.4% of recent graduates<sup>1</sup> in the UK are in non-graduate jobs. This is defined on the basis that the 'tasks associated with post holders in these jobs do not normally require knowledge and skills developed through Higher Education to enable them to perform these tasks in a competent manner' (Elias and Purcell, 2013: 8; Behle, 2016 ). This is up from 37% in 2001 (ONS, 2013; ONS, 2017). In the latest Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Longitudinal survey, which examines the activities and perspectives of graduates three and a half years after graduation, 11.8% of respondents were not satisfied with their career to

date, 16.8% were in non-professional employment and 3% were on zero hours contracts in non-graduate employment such as retail, waiting and bar work and the care industry (HESA, 2017).

Underemployment is generally defined in terms of a discrepancy between educational attainment and occupational level, and measured in terms of wage differentials, human capital or education levels and underutilisation of skill (Livingstone, 1998). These markers of 'objective underemployment' (Khan and Morrow, 1991) draw upon 'accepted standards' in gauging whether an individual is underemployed. There has been considerable debate in the literature about what constitutes a graduate job or a non-graduate job and how this can be measured (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011; Behle, 2016). However, whilst these discussions and classifications are valuable in establishing macro level trends, it would also be valuable to further examine the subjective side of underemployment (Burris, 1983; Jones-Johnson and Johnson, 1992), taking into account how individuals feel about their employment in light of their educational attainment and future career aspirations. Such an approach would align with the recent reforms to collecting graduate outcomes data in the UK which now asks students to evaluate their employment related to the meaningfulness of it and relationship to future plans.<sup>2</sup> Whilst a graduate may be objectively underemployed they may not perceive themselves as being so (Maynard et al., 2006). This self-evaluation of success can further our understanding of the extent to which individuals perceive themselves to be underemployed and place their employment in the context of their wider career and life plans. Furthermore, recent work has questioned the assumption that individuals seek employment that makes full use of their education and skill, highlighting that some individuals may choose to be underemployed either to facilitate early career explorations or opt out of 'typical' career paths (Thompson et al., 2013; Steffy, 2017).

Graduate underemployment is often positioned as a period of exploration and transition while graduates find their feet in the labour market, before the 'real career' begins. However, some find themselves in situations of persistent underemployment, and it becomes untenable to frame their situation as a temporary state before a transition to

employment 'appropriate' for their skills and education (Wilkins and Wooden, 2011). This increased persistence of graduate underemployment has great societal implications (Green and Henseke, 2016), especially since certain groups may experience disproportionate disadvantage. Recent research from Steffy (2017) found US college graduates from working-class backgrounds were more likely to experience 'woeful' underemployment (being in a position of involuntary overqualification) and greater negative impact than middle-class groups.

Research has highlighted the effect underemployment may have on individuals' attitudes toward their present and future employment. Feelings of frustration, disappointment and low levels of job satisfaction occur as individuals who perceive themselves to be underemployed feel they deserve better employment with 'higher pay, prestige, autonomy and challenge' in light of their education and qualifications (Jones-Johnson and Johnson, 1995: 75). Individuals who desire and feel entitled to 'better jobs' compare their personal employment situation to a referent standard (McKee-Ryan et al., 2009) which is neither objective nor temporally static (Feldman et al., 2002). The sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction an individual experiences is thus dependent largely on comparisons with others – a sense of relative deprivation (Johnson et al., 2002). For research on underemployment the lack of a standard referent is generally problematic, both theoretically and methodologically, in terms of developing more nomothetic explanations (McKee-Ryan and Harvey, 2011). However, this is less problematic for research into underemployment among recent graduates. Having limited work experience they are largely defined in terms of their graduate status, so they are a group for whom there can be some generally accepted referent points, e.g., a generic referent linked to prevailing perceptions of graduate employment (investment in human capital) or a more specific referent linked to the relative progress of others with whom one graduated. This aligns with work in the area of career success (e.g., Heslin, 2005) which emphasises that individuals evaluate their employment situation by comparison with a referent standard – typically a referent other. These theoretical perspectives are

useful to explore the ways in which individual graduates frame their underemployment and the implication this has for their reactions to it.

### Reactions to underemployment

Most prior research on underemployment has focused on the negative consequences for the individual, organisation and society.

Underemployment has negative implications on work-related (individual's job attitudes, commitment and performance) and wellbeing outcomes (mental health and physical wellbeing) (Allan et al., 2017; Bolino and Feldman, 2000; Feldman, 1996; Jones-Johnson and Johnson, 1992) with knock-on effects on family functioning and relationships (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011). Underemployment is a source of frustration and discontent for individuals (Burris 1983) with the underemployed faced with challenges to their self-identity, interpersonal relationships and a sense of meaning in life (Borgen et al., 1988: 157). Furthermore, there have been long-standing concerns that the failure of society to 'make good' on the implicit promise that investment in educational attainment will 'pay off' economically will lead to social, political and economic problems as underemployed individuals become increasingly disillusioned and frustrated (Livingstone, 1998; Mills, 1953). A recent report highlighted underemployment as a key contributing factor to disillusionment in Europe's young people that may undermine future political, economic and social stability (PACE, 2012).

Another area of concern relates to the long-term effects of periods of underemployment on graduates' career prospects. Underemployment may be entered as a means to avoid unemployment (Borgen et al., 1988; Feldman, 1996; Leana and Feldman, 1992), reflecting the assumption that any job (even if underemployed) is better than no job (unemployment) in terms of future career trajectory. This premise is supported by evidence that once graduates are unemployed there is a decline in their ability to move into graduate jobs (Green and Henseke, 2016). However, 'unsatisfactory employment' experiences can have the same psychological effects for young people as unemployment (Winefield et al., 1991). Nunley et al. (2017) raise questions about the value of periods of underemployment on employment prospects.

Creating a set of randomised fictitious CVs for college graduates with differing periods of unemployment and underemployment, they submitted these to 2300 online recruitment advertisements (making a total of 9396 applications). They found that periods of underemployment appeared to be perceived more negatively by employers than periods of unemployment. Applicants who were underemployed were 30% less likely than those who were unemployed to be selected by employers for interview (Nunley et al., 2017). Such findings reflect a sense that employers may perceive that the attributes developed through Higher Education have a 'use by' date. This helps to explain the finding from the same study that gaining internship experience whilst studying reduced the negative impact of the period of underemployment.

Whilst research suggests underemployed individuals reassess their career goals and engage in job search activity to obtain 'better' employment (Borgen et al., 1988; Feldman and Turnley, 1995), we know little about how and when they do this – for example, what career planning and management occurs and how sustained it is. There has been very little research on if or how individuals attempt to shape or craft the role in which they are underemployed. Lin et al. (2017) argue the focus on the negative implications of and reactions to underemployment reflect an assumption that the content of a job is fixed. There is a need to challenge this understanding and explore the extent to which underemployment may lead to individuals proactively crafting their roles as a means to align their employment with a positive self-image – as a coping mechanism in response to their underemployment. Those in positions of underemployment may bring creativity and high levels of organisational citizenship behaviours to the organisations, and managers should seek to support individuals in this crafting (Lin et al., 2017). This echoes the argument of Thompson et al. (2013) that organisations may 'harness' the potential of underemployed individuals through providing opportunities for them to contribute beyond their roles. They frame this as job enrichment, but it must be acknowledged that it may simply result in job enlargement, and thus exploit an already vulnerable group.

In the remainder of this chapter we present a narrative analysis of underemployed graduates to explore how graduates frame and respond to their experience of underemployment.

### The study

This aim of this study was to explore graduates' experiences of underemployment. All participants were employed as call centre operatives, in roles that had little discretion, low levels of skill variety and very little control. This was a specific group, selected to gain insight into the phenomenon of graduate underemployment. There were few opportunities for career progression and those available often required further study specifically related to the sector. This would not be seen as a graduate job, either in the 'traditional sense' or within the new classifications of graduate work (Purcell et al., 1999; Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011). Over a period of 18–24 months we gathered data from 17 individuals, 12 of whom worked for the same employer. There were 5 women and 12 men, and the ages of the individuals ranged between 21 and 27. All had bachelor degrees in social sciences or humanities.

### Findings

Three main themes emerged from the data. Firstly the graduates framed their initial experiences as something that they had voluntarily entered and expected. Secondly, that this then framed the way in which they responded to and accounted for their situation. Thirdly, that time played a significant role in shaping graduates' experiences to underemployment. We shall now go on to explore these in more detail.

#### Expectation of voluntary underemployment

All of our participants framed their situation as 'something that they had expected' reflecting a lack of urgency to concern themselves about their employment opportunities and prospects upon graduation. They expected there to be 'a period of time' (a phrase they all used) in which they planned to 'sort themselves out'.

I just thought well when I leave university I have probably got about a year to sort myself out. I had just envisaged maybe doing any old job for

a year until I had sorted myself out and got a job that I was supposed to be getting.

(Ollie, Male, 23)

None of the individuals pinpointed why they expected there to be this 'period of time', exactly how long they had expected it to last, or how they intended to bring this phase to an end. There was little mention of job search activity. Individuals were reluctant to take any job which might require a commitment they felt they could not give. They seemed in some ways to take a moral stance towards taking on 'proper' jobs, feeling it would not be right to do so when they expected soon to quit to go travelling or similar (though this could equally be a rationalisation of their failure to act):

I don't like doing something if I'm not gonna do it properly. So I didn't wanna go and get a graduate job do it for six months, like it, think I had prospects of going somewhere and then have to pack it in.

(Brian, Male, 22)

All had envisaged subsidising this period through temporary employment, similar to the jobs they'd held at university, believing (rightly) they would be able to get 'something' (through employment agencies or ads in the local paper) to tide them over. Try (2004) observed a similar pattern of continuing after graduation with the kind of jobs they'd held as students, and suggested this could serve as a 'stepping stone' from education to employment. Our participants viewed their jobs solely as a means to support a continuation of the student lifestyle; they did not view the jobs as part of their 'career'. The positive aspects of their work were identified as wages, hours worked and the people they worked with, plus the fact these three elements enabled them to have a certain lifestyle.

Initial responses to underemployment

Participants talked about the 'proper job' they would get in the future, which had the characteristics traditionally associated with high level managerial roles – a 'typical graduate job' (Elias et al., 1999). Although aware of the general expectations regarding graduate employment,

their current situation was interpreted and 'justified' through relating it to their future plans at that point, albeit that these plans were very hazy. This didn't seem to concern them, as their underemployment and lack of specific plans for the future was consistent with many other graduates they knew:

I was surprised at how many of us [graduates] there are, one of the managers always laughs about it and says [these places are] like graduate graveyards.

(Jack, Male, 26)

Collin (2000) suggested we make sense of our career situation by taking 'readings' against widely shared norms and expectations and, more personally, against our lives as a whole and in interaction with significant others (Jenkins, 1996). The participants certainly did this, but often in a very selective fashion. They perceived others as having negative views of their employment, yet in general spoke of these views in an almost nonchalant manner, as if they were of little importance and rather secondary to their own perceptions of their employment, which they justified in terms of the benefits and its temporary nature. They noted that when talking about their job to others they remained vague about the details, although some said they emphasised the money they earned, which was one of the positives – their peers in ostensibly better jobs were often surprised to discover how well they were paid.

When speaking of those who did have a 'graduate job' they were keen to stress how hard these individuals had worked to gain the role, the effort and hours they were required to put into the job and the limited financial reward they received for doing so. They did not view these individuals' jobs in terms of the long-term career benefits, reflecting what Hesketh (2000) terms career immaturity, where immediate gratification is sought as opposed to long-term gains. In the graduates' case the immediate gratification came from their ability to support and maintain their 'student' lifestyle. This attitude also played a part in the formation of their 'reading' of where they were in terms of their employment, relative to their life as a whole.



The accounts did highlight negative aspects of their work. The jobs were described as routine, monotonous and highly controlled with little opportunity for discretion. Many referred to themselves as 'phone monkeys', a derogatory term reflecting the lack of skill required in their role:

I say the same crap to the same people. You get a small sense of satisfaction if you sell it, but I still know that a trained monkey could do my job.

(Jack, Male, 26)

One individual joked about the possibility of a friend becoming a 'senior phone monkey':

He says 'well I could stay in the position that I am in or leave, but then any one could look at my CV and see that I've been a phone monkey for a year, or I can be a senior phone monkey and I can boss the other phone monkeys around', but I mean, I think that like a manager phone monkey is worse, because it looks like you're taking it seriously.

(Ollie, Male, 23)

It was interesting that the graduates were keen to distinguish themselves from what they saw as 'real' phone monkeys, individuals who were not graduates and were working in the call centres for the long term.

Despite their disdain for their jobs, participants did recognise the opportunity for skill use and development, if they chose to 'make the most of it':

If I wanted to go on and do a team manager's position that would develop a lot more skills. But I am not going to. I can see people who are doing it and they are developing a lot more skills by doing it but I don't see the point.

(Fran, Female, 27)

They saw little point pursuing opportunities in a job and an organisation in which they didn't plan to stay for the long term.

Previous research has suggested that the transition between graduation and work can be a tumultuous one, with individuals' expectations not being met and a sense of disillusionment occurring (Arnold and MacKenzie Davey, 1992; King, 2003). Similarly, after the initial novelty and excitement of entering employment and earning a wage, individuals who are underemployed will become disillusioned (Borgen et al., 1988). Neither response was visible among our participants, for at least the first 12 months. The majority of participants claimed the job still met the expectations they had held when they entered it; that the work would not be a meaningful experience but a means to an end, albeit a somewhat ambiguous 'end' for most. This absence of unmet expectations may explain why the individuals' experience of underemployment did not result in the expected levels of job searching for alternative employment (Burris, 1983).

### Making sense over time

Time serves as an indicator by which individuals can compare their experiences with others, and 'timetable norms' may exist that help individuals to structure their experience, utilising 'signposts', drawn from consensus of expectation, as reference points (Roth, 1963). In the initial interviews the graduates felt the period of time they had been in their current employment was consistent with the notion of it being a temporary stop-gap, but they recognised the longer they remained in this situation, the more difficult it would be to 'justify' it to future employers and to significant others, and there was consensus on the need to 'move on' in the near future in order to make the 'stop-gap' status of their situation credible to both themselves and others. Although they had constructed a 'reality' that their situation was acceptable and comparable to many other graduates, this could not be sustained in the long term as they were aware of societal expectations of what a graduate should be doing and when a graduate should be doing it.

As time passed and they did not move on to the 'proper jobs' they had previously talked about, they began to get exasperated at the limited scope for adding to their roles, and made increased references to not using their degree:

It was alright at first, you know the money, the hours and all that but it's not something I want to be doing forever and it seems like I have been. I am getting more stupid by the day, repeating myself all day long. And at the end of the day what am I doing? I'm not doing anything just reading off a script and that's it.

(Emma, Female, 22)

The positive elements of money and hours were still mentioned but it became apparent this was no longer enough and they were beginning to look for 'something more' from their employment. References to what they thought they 'should be doing' were made on an increasingly frequent basis. It was at this point the majority of the participants, about two thirds of the initial sample, now started to make and pursue specific plans. This planning was often talked about with reference to the length of time they had been in their situation and how they thought others, particularly future employers, would view this.

they are going to look at my CV and be like 'that's interesting two years as a Phone Monkey, did you do any training at the company?' No. 'Did you get any skills that you can use here?' No. 'Can you shed some light on why you were there so long?' No. It just looks bad, it's definitely time for me to get off my backside now, I've had a good time and enjoyed myself but it's, well I mean two years is a bloody long time for nothing to happen.

(Dan, Male, 23)

The plans developed took three forms – to go travelling, to obtain more 'appropriate' employment, or to consider seeking promotion within the call centre. All had started to take some actions to achieve their plans. The would-be travellers planned itineraries, booked tickets and saved money, the individuals looking for more 'appropriate' employment started to search and apply for jobs, while those looking for promotion took on extra responsibilities, put in more effort and took up development opportunities as a way of working towards promotion.

As they took steps that served to reconfirm their situation as a temporary stop-gap, they once again focused on the positive elements.

Although they still experienced boredom and frustration this was tempered by the focus they now had on achieving their future plans.

I still think this is a crappy job, but I am really focussed now [and so] I don't see the point of leaving this for another crappy job that might not be as good. It wouldn't be worth it as I'm only here for a little bit longer now.

(Ollie, Male, 23)

Although some had previously spoken of the possibility of pursuing promotion within the call centre, this had been as a way to gain something extra from their time in the call centre, not as a possible career. As time passed, however, several seemed to be changing their views and expectations of their employment, and were beginning to speak more positively about their roles, the call centre and the company itself.

There is a real possibility of moving further up now, and they've also offered to pay for like umm Chartered Institute of Insurance . . . which you know I could use to get into insurance as a career.

(Dan, Male, 23)

They started to see potential for a 'career' to be developed from this employment. This was not an option previously considered as part of their long-term plans and although they now saw it as an option it still did not seem to sit comfortably with them.

One week I think yeah this is an alright thing to do and it could go somewhere but then the next week I think I could probably do a little bit better, and its time I moved on.

(Dan, Male, 23).

Those individuals planning to pursue promotion now talked much more positively of their situation, apparently reluctant to say anything that did not gel with their notion of it being an appropriate career path. Those who had 'moved on', or were taking steps to do so, had begun a 'process of renewal' (Borgen et al., 1988). The extent to which they experienced the situation as underemployment had lessened as a result

of the activities they were undertaking in order to end their situation. For those who remained, but now had a fixed end-point in sight, it was as if they were back to where they had been in the initial interviews. The jobs could again be seen as a 'means to an end', as this view of the situation reflected their new 'reading' of their position.

## Conclusion

Our findings suggest some graduates remain in non-graduate jobs for much longer than previous survey data has captured, and this 'persistent underemployment' may be more of a formative period for their careers than previously thought. The findings show how the phenomenon of graduate underemployment has become sufficiently common to provide an alternative reference point for graduates taking 'readings' of their career position. For an extended period our participants could compare themselves to large numbers of graduates whose position was similar to their own. The comparison was made in objective career terms – they were looking at graduates who they saw as similar to themselves (in background and academic performance) and who had been in a non-graduate job for a similar period after having left university. For at least a year after graduating they found it relatively easy to justify their situation as comparable with significant numbers of their peers. Only gradually did the number of comparators dwindle to a point where their narrative became less credible.

Had they made comparisons in terms of the subjective career, they may have found much greater differences. Though there appears to be a general trend for young people to delay the launch of their careers (Feldman and Whitcomb, 2005), what they do during this delay and how they frame it may be very different. Even where two individuals appear to have a very similar pattern of employment, one may perceive the situation as a series of dead-end jobs while the other may frame it as 'browsing' the labour market and available career options, and gaining useful experience, as a prelude to a delayed career launch. Our participants had very similar objective careers, but their subjective careers – the way in which they framed their situation and engaged with work – became progressively more varied over time. The subjective career perspective is thus vital in helping us understand how and why a

period of underemployment may have lasting effects on attitudes to work and career.

These findings raise questions about 'what happens next' for underemployed graduates and if it has an impact on an individual's subsequent career. There are three key areas to explore in this regard. First, the graduates' underemployment triggered a great deal of sensemaking, which produced a working career script (Barley, 1989) which seemed fragile yet enduring. Whilst events can overturn such interpretations and alter our career narratives (Glanz, 2003), we speculate these early career scripts may have long-term implications for the careers of these individual and also for how they are perceived by future employers (Blenkinsopp and Scurry, 2007). Second, we might also examine what kind of disruptions (e.g., parental prompting, friends who move on) are most likely to trigger fresh sensemaking and the writing of a new career script, and whether different triggers produce different outcomes. A final issue is that our study suggests underemployment led some of the graduates to lower their career expectations, most obviously by taking a post within the call centre that they could have obtained without ever having gone to university. Caution must be exercised here – Elias and Purcell (2004) found the graduate premium in earnings develops over a 10–15 year period after graduating, and it is possible these individuals will gain benefit from their graduate status eventually. For example, although a graduate obtaining a Team Leader post aged 24 might observe s/he is in the same position as a colleague who left school at 16 and had worked for eight years, in the long run the graduate may be in a better position to apply for further promotions. This highlights a potentially important issue for underemployed graduates, which is that opportunities to progress and realise their potential may require them to commit to, and engage with, employment which they would not have imagined to be their lot. The response of our participants was to keep work at arm's length, consciously resisting commitment. The tension between the graduates' view that their jobs were dull and routine and their acknowledgement that they nevertheless could be vehicles for career development was an ongoing feature of their talk. None of them maintained a constant position towards this, even in the initial interviews, and it was

fascinating to see how an individual's account of their work varied as they were making sense of their employment for the researcher and themselves.

There is clearly a need for longitudinal research exploring the consequences of early career underemployment on both objective and subjective career. University education is a significant investment for the individual and society, and the careers of graduates are in many ways the most obvious product of that investment. Our study has highlighted a number of ways in which that investment can fail to pay dividends, leading to negative consequences for individuals, organisation and society. Developing a greater understanding of the career implications of graduate underemployment will provide a basis for career guidance interventions that help to prepare graduates for managing and making sense of periods of underemployment. There is clearly scope for future research in this space, in particular work that examines the interactions of wider structures, such as social class (Burke et al., 2017), and the impact on who experiences underemployment and how they experience and respond to underemployment.

## Notes

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**1** Defined as those who left full time education within 5 years of the survey date.

**2** Details of the review and the revised survey can be found here: [www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/records/reviews/newdlhe/model/survey/al](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/records/reviews/newdlhe/model/survey/al)  
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